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Critical Arts-Based Research: A Performance of Provocation

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Abstract

The article from a Critical Race Theory standpoint draws on data from life history interviews with undocumented Mexican-Americans, and live performance work with Mexican-American artists, to reflect on the ways in which critical arts-based research impacts upon research participants as artists, subjects, and audience. To-date arts-based research literature has tended to concentrate on theoretically framing a performance piece within a specific genre (and its acclaimed advantages) and subsequently describing in detail the nature of a performance; an approach which at times means the impact of a performance is accepted uncritically, if not taken for granted. Our intent in this article is to draw on post-performance interviews and correspondence with artists, subjects and audience members to critically reflect on participant impact; an impact which in this article we are calling a *performance of provocation*.

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Critical Arts-Based Research: A Performance of Provocation.

Introduction: Following Madison (2005)...

Here only what is written is understood. Such is the internal law of that which has constituted itself as 'Western' [and 'white']

(de Certeau 1984, p.161)

..it is a fallacy to assume that the swarming, unpredictable, and problematic mess in which human beings live can be understood on the basis of what books – texts – say

(Said 1979, p.93)

In the same way in which critical ethnography is ethnography with a political purpose (Madison, 2005) so critical arts based research is primarily conceived as arts-based research with an explicit political purpose. One in which the researcher is situated in a position of tension and antagonism towards the status quo, challenging dominant discourses and conventional ideas within society.

As we state elsewhere the aim of critical arts-based research is for

.....a methodological alignment with subjugated peoples and voices, to uncover unequal power relations and the disproportionate impact these relations have on certain groups marginalised because of their ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, gender and class’

(Bagley and Castro-Salazar, 2012, pp. 241-2).

In challenging the dominant ‘Western [and ‘white’] (de Certeau 1984, p.161) discursively naïve positioning of the written text as preeminent in terms of the transmission of meaning and knowledge (Said, 1979), critical arts-based research seeks through performance to lead to a (re) engagement with the world of the ‘other’, a disruption of socially constructed perceptions of difference, and a (re)awakening and (re)examination of attitudes and beliefs. The critical pedagogical value of critical arts-based research relates to the content to be performed, the process by which the performance is staged and the consequences for participants – situated as subjects, artists and audience. The desire is to open up to debate and scrutiny the social inequities and injustices of a status quo and which ‘directly or indirectly, implicitly or explicitly, personally or institutionally, perpetuated prejudice, discrimination and disenfranchisement’ (Bagley and Castro-Salazar 2012, p 242). Critical arts-based research is conceived as a performance-based approach whereby the voices of the marginalised and dispossessed can be accessed, legitimized and empowered to confront social issues and to stimulate, incite, and inspire a commitment to social justice and social change (Bagley and Castro-Salazar, 2012). In essence, critical arts-based research is unashamedly a *performance of provocation*.

Madison (2005) in her critical ethnographic work talks of accessing ‘the voices and experiences of subjects whose stories are otherwise restrained [and] out of reach’, in order to publically offer ‘emancipatory knowledge and discourses of social justice’ (p.5). Reproducing a piece originally published in 1988, Madison (2005) reflects critically on the staging of ethnographic performances referring to ‘a performance of possibilities’ to elucidate ‘a movement culminating in creation and change’ (p.172). She states:

[The performance of possibilities] is the active, creative work that weaves the life of the mind with being mindful of life, of merging the text with the world, of critically traversing the margin and the center, and of opening more and different paths for enlivening relations and spaces.

(Madison, 2005, p.172)

A crucially important, but sometimes neglected aspect of arts-based research endeavours is the reporting of feedback and experiential data following a performance. The tendency within arts-based genres has often been to theoretically locate the work and then describe in detail the nature of a performance. Subsequently, this theoretical framing and its associated potential advantages mean the efficacy of the approach – in terms of the actual performance especially those which are none auto-ethnographically grounded - has at times been accepted uncritically and taken for granted. In her work Madison (2005) considers the potential of performance from three vantage

points, namely the ‘subjects, whose lives and words are being performed... the audience who witnesses the performance and ... the performers who embody and enact the data’ (p.172).

Following Madison (2005) our intention in this article is to draw on post-performance interviews and correspondence to uncover and illuminate the potential of critical arts based research from the perspectives of artists, subjects and audience.

Interestingly, in making ‘The Call to Performance’ Denzin (2003, p.11) cites the following lines from a poem “Visiting Mario” by Hartnett (2001, pp.25-27) which evocatively resonates with our research

Somewhere Near Salinas, Lord” Kristofferson/Joplin

ten-thousand sprinklers spin slowly

in overlapping circles...

drinking water from plastic jugs

hats propped on knees leathery

hands scarred from lifetimes

of harvesting glory

of California

for five dollars a day....

choking the old Mexican woman sobs

her boy is cuffed and taken back to hell..

This article draws on our critical arts based work with undocumented Mexican-Americans who have navigated across racialized historical, socioeconomic, political and culturally colonized boundaries, to make a life for themselves in the United States (US) (Castro-Salazar and Bagley 2012). We use the term “undocumented” in contrast to the term “illegal” commonly used by political commentators and the media in relation to individuals living (and working) within the US without formal permission. Undocumented individuals do not have de jure authorization to be in the country, but they are economic, cultural, and social members of their communities and hence de facto citizens (Del Castillo, 2002). Further, the term illegal has come to be discursively repositioned as a noun with the labeling of undocumented Mexicans as “illegals”. It thus operates as a dehumanizing signifier denoting xenophobia and anti-Mexican racism; the illegality situated in the body of the individual rather than any law they may have breached (Oppenheimer, 2007).

In terms of our use of the descriptor Mexican-Americans we acknowledge that the “emergence of transnational communities and the efforts of the state to include migrants in its sphere of influence” has contributed to “a crisis of the hyphen” (Pansters, 2005, p.84). Furthermore, according to modern style manuals, “Mexican-American” should be hyphenated only as a compound proper adjective (Mexican-American student, French-Canadian cuisine), but not as a noun denoting dual heritage (National Geographic, 2010). Nevertheless, in this paper we utilize the gentilic “Mexican-American” as a symbol of the lived experiences of undocumented Americans of Mexican origin in the United States. The hyphenation of “Mexican-American” gives equal weight to both heritages, symbolizing the intimacy between the two identities and their continuity. It denotes that a Mexican-American is both Mexican and American and cannot exist without one of the two

attributes. Without the hyphen, “Mexican” could be understood as the adjective and “American” as a noun, denoting that “American is the main identity and “Mexican” a characteristic of this particular American. This is not wrong for any Mexican-origin person who feels proudly "American," but being recognized as such should not be at the expense of Mexican affiliation. Ultimately, the hyphen reminds us that, in this quandary of definitions, not everyone fits neatly into predetermined categories. Undocumented Americans of Mexican origin do not feel at ease on either side of “Mexican-American” and, perhaps more than anybody else, find themselves trapped in the hyphen, as expressed in a poem written by Wendell Aycock in 1976 entitled *Hyphenation*:

Sitting atop the hyphen provides a marvelous view, but no direction.

Does one face forward or backward? Look behind or ahead?

the hyphen is incomplete; there is no where to go.

the force of the dash,

the inclusiveness of the parenthesis,

the finality of the period.

The Hyphen only supports. It does not connect.

Japanese-American, Mexican-American, Italian-American-

Lacking the two slight marks that gives the arrow its certainty,

the hyphen is incomplete; there is no where to go.

Existing between two cultures,

it is an eternal bridge

with barriers and guards at both ends.

This poem resonates as a painfully familiar description of the space where undocumented Mexican-Americans exist. Thus, if in the eyes of the majority they are invisible, we acknowledge their presence by the use of the hyphen. In a way, they have become the hyphen, caught between two life-worlds but not formally belonging to either one. In the poignant words of an undocumented Mexican-American subject from our study, they feel “*ni de aquí ni from there*” (not from here not from there). Nevertheless, they fight and dream to become the embodied ‘bridge’ that connects both sides of those two life-worlds, the hyphen symbolizing a needle in a compass pointing simultaneously in two directions, both ways home.

Meanwhile they continue to constitute, as Conquergood (2002) observes:

Among the most oppressed people in the United States today are the “undocumented” immigrants, the so called “illegal aliens,” known in the vernacular as the people “sin papeles” the people without papers, *indocumentado/as*. They are illegal because they are not legible, they trouble “the writing machine of the law” (de Certeau 1984, 141)

(Conquerwood, 2002, p.35)

Constituting about 58%, or 6.5 million of all ‘unauthorized’ residents in the US (Passel and Cohn, 2011), undocumented Mexican-Americans are positioned as one of the most vulnerable subjugated and poorest groups in US society (Chávez, 2005; Lichter et al. 2005). They are excluded from public services like education, healthcare, and housing, the protection of labor laws (De Genova 2004), and live in constant fear of being deported and separated from their families (Feldblum 2000; Kittrie 2006). In particular undocumented Mexican-Americans are

subject to gross economic exploitation (Sarther 2006), their cheap labor functioning as an engine of growth to economic vitality in many sectors of the economy (Ewing, 2003), contributing at least \$154 billion to the US GDP (Hinojosa-Ojeda, 2001). As an article by John Micklethwait (2000) in the journal *The Economist* reported:

The embarrassing secret is the importance to daily life of illegal immigrants. Every American politician claims to condemn their presence, but without them the domestic life of middle-class America would fall apart; food prices would climb steeply as produce rotted in the fields; hotel rooms would stand uncleaned; swimming pools would become septic tanks; and taxis would disappear from the streets. In short, the country would grind to a halt.

(Micklethwait , 2000, retrieved from <http://www.economist.com/node/289744>)

In a climate of growing racist castigation and economic exploitation undocumented Mexican-Americans are becoming ever more resolute, resilient and politically active; prepared to make a stand against legal violence, repression, and racial discrimination (Haney López, 2001). In seeking a performance of provocation our theoretical stance and methodological approach outlined below is intended to acknowledge the undocumented Mexican-American experience and co-participate with them, artists and audience members in telling and celebrating their stories of resilience and resistance.

Theory and Method

You who understand the...humiliation of having to falsify your own reality, your voice – you know. And often cannot say it. You try and keep on trying to unsay it, for if you don't, they will not fail to fill in the blanks on your behalf, and you will be said.

(Trinh, 1989, 80)

Our critical arts-based research with undocumented Mexican-Americans involved a fusion of Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Ladson-Billings, 1998), as a means to theoretically position and frame our standpoint and thinking, a life history or person-centred ethnographic approach (Wolcott, 1999), as the primary means of data elicitation, and live performance (including art-work display) as the means to disseminate our findings. The overall intention was to co-participate with undocumented Mexican-Americans to enable them 'to fill in the blanks' of their 'own reality' (Trinh, 1989, 80).

The CRT life history approach leading to performance was conceived as a process of respectful dialogue (Freire, 1960) by which as researchers we were able to talk with and back to the undocumented Mexican-American subjects; an essential purpose of the research being to capture their lived experiences, to incite reflection and mutual learning from their counter-narratives and sources of agency. Further in eliciting counter-narratives in this manner and working on these texts with Mexican-American artists to craft a performance for a live audience, the approach was conceptually aligned to the Freirean (1970, p1) notion of 'conscientization', namely 'an ongoing process by which participants as learners move toward critical consciousness' (Breunig 2011, p.58). A critical consciousness in which subjects, artists and audience members through their immersion in the research not only gain a more indepth understanding of the manifestations of

oppression, but have a desire to take individual and collective action against the injustices illuminated.

In line with CRT, the life history narratives were explored in their multifaceted contexts and dimensions, not simply as individual productions, but also as the product of cultural and ideological contexts (Bell, 2003; Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). The narratives were elicited by prolonged unstructured in-depth interviews with the purpose of understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience (Seidman, 2006). The interview process involved delicate matters of legality and vulnerability and so the level of trust and rapport between interviewer and participants needed to be very high. In this instance, it was particularly important that the interviewees were able to ask questions of the interviewer, explore intent, seek clarification, and come to trust and value the interviewer's motives. Through this process the interviewer and interviewee were subsequently able to co-participate in the process of seeking understanding, to co-recover and 'reveal the meaning of lived experience' (Yow, 1994, p.25) as an undocumented Mexican-American. Moreover, the life-history interviews were perceived not only as a means of culturally and politically co-recovering and recording lived experience but ultimately as 'a vehicle for producing performance texts about self and society' (Denzin 2001, p.24). Madison (2005) describes the aims of performance-based researchers who employ critical theory in their analyses as follows:

To articulate and identify hidden forces and ambiguities that operate beneath appearances; to guide judgments and evaluations emanating from our discontent; to direct our attention to the critical expressions within different interpretive communities relative to their unique symbol systems, customs, and codes; to demystify the ubiquity and

magnitude of power; to provide insight and inspire acts of justice; and to name and analyze what is intuitively felt.

(Madison, 2005, p.13)

A total of six undocumented Mexican-American's volunteered to participate as subjects in the study with a minimum of two in-depth life-history interviews conducted with each participant, culminating in the generation and subsequent grounded analysis (Glazer and Strauss, 1967) of approximately 30 hours of taped transcript. (For a more detailed analysis of the interview findings see Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010). The interviews - when requested - were conducted in Spanish and subsequently translated. During the research process transcripts were shared with interviewees for accuracy and if necessary modification. At the end of the initial pre-performance fieldwork period the analysis of the data - located in its wider CRT-informed socio-political, historical and economic context - was also shared and discussed with interviewees.

The next stage of the critical arts-based research process turned to the live performance event and the decision to ground the performance within the local Mexican-American community in terms of artists and audience. The Mexican American Studies Research Center and the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Arizona, along with personal contacts known to Ricardo, assisted in the search for artists and community-based venue. The artists (a photographer, a painter, a poet, a musician, a choreographer/dancer and two dancers) were carefully chosen following several meetings and discussions concerning their commitment to the undertaking and the cause of undocumented Mexican Americans. All the artists were of Mexican birth or heritage (at least one of whom was known to be undocumented). Each artist was paid a

nominal fee, as were the individuals responsible for stage lighting, sound and filming of the performance. A local community theatre, 'Beowulf Alley', in downtown Tucson was selected and hired as the venue to stage the performance.

The texts in the form of interview transcript, along with other contextual CRT informed data were shared with the artists, who were given a free hand to interpret and create a performance text to be staged as vignettes in a two-hour live performance. The visual artwork derived from the data was to be exhibited in the entrance to the auditorium. In seeking to reflect and convey the 'hyphenated' life experiences and aspirations of the undocumented Mexican-American interviewees and the geo-spacial environment they had encountered in travelling to the South-western US, the performance event was given the resonant title: *Undocumented Historias in the Desert of Dreams*

Attendees to the performance did not have to pay for admission, but were expected to contribute a donation to Fundación México (a not-for-profit organization that awards scholarships to undocumented students) according to their means. On the evening of the performance, the small theatre with official seating for 110, was overcrowded with an additional 60 people sitting on the floor, in aisles and even in the sound and lighting room behind the seating area. Approximately, 100 people had to be turned away. The audience was predominantly of Mexican origin and included members of the general public, community activists, representatives of the Mexican Consulate, and students and academics. The undocumented Mexican-Americans upon whose life stories the performance was based were also in the audience. The audience also included non-Mexican individuals and groups sympathetic to the political cause of undocumented peoples.

Following the performance¹ interviews were conducted with ten members of the general audience (a further 10 unsolicited emails as way of feedback from audience members was also received). Interviews were also conducted with four of the undocumented Mexican-Americans on whose narratives the performance was based, and who were in the audience, and three of the artists involved in the production: Marisol, the painter, Yvonne, the choreographer and Dulce, the poet.

Provoking Artists

Possibly, one of the most neglected areas of research in terms of understanding and ascertaining the impact of a performance relates to the artists themselves (Deal, 2008). In relation to their selection and the critical race theory underpinning our thinking it was important that the artists with whom we collaborated shared our broader perspectives towards the endemic racism within the US and the socio-economic, political and cultural impact this had had upon the lives of the undocumented interviewees. Undoubtedly, the identification of critically-engaged artists of Mexican origin facilitated a specific emotional, cultural and political tie between performers and subjects. The *performance of possibilities*, Madison argues, demands that subjects are viewed as people with agency, as “makers of meaning, symbol, and history in their full sensory and social dimensions” (173). She writes that “[p]erforming subversive and subaltern voices proclaims existence, within particular locales and discourses, that are being witnessed – entered

¹ In this article while drawing on limited examples of the performance in the sub-section reflecting on the experiences of the artists, we do not seek to depict the event in detail which has been presented elsewhere (see Bagley and Castro-Salazar, 2012). An abridged audio-visual record of the performance can be viewed at:

<http://www.tinyurl.com/bagley-salazar/performancemedium.wmv>.

into one's own experience – and this witnessing cannot be denied' (Madison, 2005 173). All the artists stated that on receiving the transcripts and reading the stories they felt an exceptionally strong bond to the lives and experiences being recounted. As the following comment by one of the artists reveals:

I read the transcripts and what immediately struck me was how familiar the stories were. The tension, the fear, the prejudice the desire to succeed against the odds, the fact you at times feels like a stranger in your own country, it was like reading my own story, and in that way it made it easier for me to get inside the stories and strengthened my desire to tell them.

(Dulce, Mexican-American Artist, Poet)

All the artists were highly motivated in their desire to do the most professional job they could in communicating the subject's lived experience to a wider audience. To this end each artist spent a great deal of time and critical reflection on the best way to utilise their artistic talents to maximum effect and impact. Madison (2005) eloquently describes the artistic process in the following terms:

Since the performer is transported slowly, deliberately and incrementally at each rehearsal and at each encounter toward the knowledge and life world of the subject, the performer is creatively and intellectually taking it all in, internalising and receiving partial maps of meaning that reflect the subjects consciousness and context. This

receptiveness however is never completely without the generative filter of the performers own knowledge and location. The process of being transported of receiving meanings and generating meanings, isintimate and potentiallytraumatic

(Madison, 2005, p.177)

Similarly, in our work it was evident the artistic process of painting, writing and choreographing was a particularly moving and emotional experience as the artists became closer to the voices and lives in the data they sought to portray; a connection in this instance heightened by the artists' personal or familial experience of the same issues. As Dulce the poet observed

The reading and re reading of the stories and really immersing myself into the text was at times upsetting and hard. It was an emotionally difficult process at times, but I wanted to do a good job not just because I am an artist but because I related to these stories and I wanted to tell them to an audience in a way which let them see not only the educational problems and the pain but also the hope that together we can do something. This why I opened and closed my poem *LIBERTAD* [Liberty], by saying:

“Everyone has a story and every one of us has feelings. But there is a thing we have in common. We are all victims of one thing: a feeling, an anxiety, a need – Liberty”

(Dulce, Mexican-American Artist, Poet)

There was a clear appreciation amongst the artists that ‘.....the form of representation one uses has something to do with the form of understanding one secures (Eisner, 2001, p.139) and the artists in the process of choreographing the dance, painting the picture or writing the poem were not only concerned with being technically accomplished, but empirically grounding the work so as not to lose the political message of the lived experiences they wanted to get across; to create something that an audience would find both meaningful and aesthetic. As Morrison (1994, p. 497) observes: “It seems to me that the best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time”.

The artistic process and the subsequent display or performance of their specific pieces seemingly impacted on the artists in creating a deeper understanding of the issues; in essence to see more readily the political in the personal. As Marisol the painter commented:

The repeated work on the transcripts made me appreciate more fully than ever that it was more than just a collection of stories it was a political indictment of the ways in which the undocumented are treated, I am treated, not simply in Arizona but in the US. It made especially mindful of the ethical responsibility I had to represent these stories in a way which not only did justice to them as individuals but helped convey the whole undocumented experience to a wider audience. I was provoked by their stories and excited by the opportunity to open them to a wider audience in a way that makes them equally provoked and moved.

(Marisol, Mexican-American Artist, Painter)

Marisol subsequently painted a picture entitled *Jaula de Oro* (Golden Cage). The color painting featured in the foreground a concrete barbed wired wall signifying the border between the US and Mexico. The wall contained graffiti derived from actual graffiti present on the real border and stated 'Murderers' (directed to the U.S. immigration police), 'Deport the Migra' (Migra is the nickname Mexicans use for the immigration police), 'Frontiers, scars on the Earth' and 'Visual Terrorism' (referring to the wall and the presence of police power at the border). The background to the picture was a reworking of the US flag the Stars and Stripes. The stars had been replaced with white crosses and the red stripes were portrayed as dripping into the white. According to Marisol:

I wanted to present the stars as crosses found in graveyards to symbolise the death of those who have lost their lives crossing the border, and the red of the stripes as the blood on the hands of the US immigration police and other white racists who operate at the border.

(Marisol, Mexican-American Artist, Painter)

The work also featured a self-portrait of Marisol sitting naked inside a golden cage holding an opened book. The choice of the golden cage was significant as several subjects in telling their stories expressed their undocumented existence in terms of 'being in a golden cage'. Notably, there is a popular Mexican saying: *Aunque la jaula sea de oro no deja de ser prisión* (even if the cage is made of gold, it is still a prison). For Marisol the use of self-portraiture and the golden

cage was in her own words ‘a visual way of saying that their story is also my story. That I am an undocumented woman and also every undocumented woman’.

In “being the other,” the artist is, in Madison’s (2005, p.177) words, “taking it all in, internalizing and receiving partial maps of meaning that reflect the subject’s consciousness and context” provoking an insightful awareness of others’ subjectivities. A similar political awakening and reenvisioning was described by the Mexican-American choreographer Yvonne who reflected on the way in which a family encounter with Homeland Security provoked her to see the political in the personal. She remarked:

We were on the way to the interview for my husband’s *green card* and I suddenly became very aware of all the forms we had had to complete from US Department of Homeland Security, and in particular that each of these forms had been assigned letters and numbers, and it was a kind of eureka moment. I could see how these anonymous numbers could help shape a dance narrative around the quest for citizenship, and the clandestine emotive implications of being undocumented. This is how and why I came to the name *Clandestina* for the dance performance, and in words and movement opened with:

Form I 425A Application to register for permanent residence or adjust status I 864
I 765 AR 11 I 797 C Notice of Action I-130 Biometrics Processing data I 485
Dept of Homeland Security. You are hereby notified to appear for the interview as

scheduled below: Number A 047 0847912 Application denied. Failure to establish legitimacy based on 8CFR 247A 12C

Clandestina, Clandestina (clandestine, clandestine)

Reprimida (repressed)

Por qué nací yo de lado equivocado (why was I born on the wrong side)

Por qué te adelantaste, adelantada (why do you deny us, are you embarrassed of us?)

Escondida (hidden)

Clandestina I remain

(Yvonne, Mexican-American Artist, Choreographer/Dancer)

The involvement of Yvonne in the performance was found to have a lasting personal and professional impression. She was inspired by her experience to create a not-for-profit critical-performance dance company, where she continues to perform for social justice causes. In Yvonne's own words, 'Undocumented *Historias* was the foundation for this company.'

Provoking Subjects

The undocumented Mexican-American subjects in our research were the honoured guests at the performance although in terms of research ethics and maintaining their anonymity their presence in the audience was only known to us as researchers. The first thing which the subjects commented on was the popularity of the event and the size of the audience – as noted previously

the small theatre with official seating for 110 was overcrowded with an additional 60 people sitting on the floor in the aisles! Consequently, even before a word of a poem had been spoken or a choreographed dance step taken the performance had an impact, the subjects said they felt a strong sense of community support and respect for their lives and stories simply from the fact so many people had taken an interest and the time and effort to attend. As two of the subjects commented:

I felt humble and honoured that so many people had come, I couldn't believe it! I was so happy to see people were interested to come and listen to my story and that of the others who were interviewed and made me feel very proud of who I am and what I have achieved against the odds.

(Undocumented Mexican-American Subject)

When I turned up and people were queuing to get in I couldn't believe it. It was like going to a movie premier at which I was the star, and I felt like saying this is about me, my story that you are coming to see and hear, it made me feel good.

(Undocumented Mexican-American Subject)

Similarly, the audience's enthusiastic applause following each performance and their standing ovation to the production, had the effect on the subjects, as Madison (2005, p.173) observed, of

not simply affirming ‘who they were and how they were’ but ‘also proclaimed that what they did was noticed, appreciated’, and empathetically understood.

I can’t get over the applause from the audience it was heart-warming, it was my story they were applauding, and it was like they were saying we support you and when at times in your life you have felt very alone, to hear the audience made me emotional and noticed even if they didn’t know I was there!

(Undocumented Mexican-American Subject)

The audience’s presence, size, enthusiasm, and support for the performances with their artistic telling of the undocumented stories, all had a profound effect upon the subjects in the audience, provoking a sense not simply of support but an acceptance and affirmation of their ‘hyphenated’ existence and experiences. These feelings were reinforced by the empathetic way in which the undocumented Mexican-American subjects’ stories were artistically told and portrayed. For example, one subject commented on Dulce’s poetic reading in the following way:

The poem.... personally she had me out there, she did me, an awesome job. Every chapter you feel related..I am not from here I’m not from there.....I was proud of what she did. I talk Spanglish and she caught that and that is how I talk and who I am. I was sitting there next to my mother and holding my boyfriend’s hand and it at first shocked me and I was crying and she was crying, it was so powerful and so strong....I was so

excited...it was my feelings about being American...and a Mexican. I was listening and watching and thinking this is my story, how I experienced it how I lived it.

(Undocumented Mexican-American Subject)

The performance validated the undocumented Mexican-American subjects' life stories. The mediated space of the performance empowering them in relation to both audience members they had never met and family members who attended the performance with them. Further, the telling and shared witnessing of their stories, had in some ways a cathartic effect in both authenticating their life experiences and provoking in subjects a desire to fight on against their undocumented status. As one subject stated:

Life at times has been hard as you saw from the performances, I've worked long hours for little pay, been treated badly on the streets and at work but also had help and support from friends and family, and that kept me going for a better life and the performance tonight has added to that. The poem, the dance the pictures, they told my story, our story as undocumented. Being here has made feel I was right to go on, that I am not alone, that people who I have never met like those tonight support my fight as someone who is undocumented, that I, we, have a voice.

(Undocumented Mexican-American Subject)

The *performance of possibilities*, Madison (2005) argues, demands that subjects are viewed as people with agency, as “makers of meaning, symbol, and history in their full sensory and social dimensions” (p.173). She continues:

Performing subversive and subaltern voices proclaims existence, within particular locales and discourses, that are being witnessed – entered into one’s own experience – and this witnessing cannot be denied. The subjects themselves benefit from this proclamation through the creation of space that gives evidence not only that “I am here in the world among you,” but more importantly that “I am in the world under particular conditions that are constructed and thereby open to greater possibility.”

(Madison, 2005, p.173)

For the undocumented interviewees in the audience whose life narratives were performed, the performance was felt by them as a means of saying this is who we are, this is what we have gone through, this is what we share, and this is what we hope for and believe is possible. Moreover, it provoked in them not simply a stronger sense of identity (individual and collective) but also a reaffirmation of their desire, resilience and resistance in the face of endemic racism to fight on to achieve their goals and ambitions; to legitimise and authenticate their right to belong and reside as Mexican-Americans in the US. Arguably, the witnessing of the performance provoked a sense of conscientisation (Freire, 1970) of ‘becoming a subject with other oppressed subjects – that is, becoming part of the process of changing the world’ (Breunig, 2011, p58).

Provoking Audience

In addressing the provocative efficacy of the performance in relation to the audience any findings need to be tempered by the context in which the event was staged, namely to an audience politically pre-disposed but not necessarily overtly or directly familiar with the issue of undocumented Mexican-Americans. It was to such an audience that our work set out to speak; the performance seeking ‘to evoke and invoke shared emotional experience and understanding’ (Denzin, 2003, p.13), and reach out passionately and provocatively to an audience capable of opening-up and conveying *undocumented* realities to a wider US community.

Madison (2005) contends that one of the strongest aspects of performance is the way in which it is able to lend its support and open up the socio-political contexts of the subjects’ worlds to an audience in a way in which an audience is drawn into what she describes as the interrogative field: “the point at which the *performance of possibilities* aims to create or contribute to a discursive space where unjust systems and processes are identified and interrogated” (p.174). Moreover, that “[t]he greatest benefit to subjects is for those who bear witness to their stories to interrogate actively and purposefully those processes that limit their health and freedom” (Madison, 2005, 174). It is through performance that the barriers between the subject’s life worlds as portrayed by the artists to the audience become permeable and less delineated. Madison (2005) explains this process in the following terms:

Because performance asks the audience to travel empathically to the world of the subjects and to feel and know some of what they feel and know, two life-worlds meet and the domain of outsider and insider are simultaneously demarcated and fused . I have an

identity separate from the subject, and the performance clearly illuminates our differences. In the space of the performance, I am outsider; in the space of the world these positions are more likely switched: I am insider and the subject is the outsider. While I see that I am an outsider to the subject's experience, the performance ironically pulls me inside.

(Madison, 2005, 176)

In effect when an audience through performance is enticed and drawn into the world of the subject so potentially the dissonance between life worlds is exposed; a reflective cognitive space is created whereby audience members are able to question the causes of incongruity. Three non-Mexican-American audience members commented in the following terms:

It made me look and think about it and say so that's where you are coming from...I now have more understanding. It affected me deeply and emotionally, it connected me to their stories.

(Non-Mexican-American Audience Member)

I knew some of the issues affecting undocumented Mexican-Americans but had no idea! The whole event tonight, the art-work, the poem, everything, I began to appreciate things and not only that it has made me want to get behind this issue more. I mean I am someone who would count himself as someone pretty clued up but this has taken it to another level for me. It wasn't always easy listening and I could see the emotional impact

on people around me – especially those who could connect on a personal level much more closely than me – very powerful, very powerful.

(Non-Mexican-American Audience Member)

I am not sure exactly what I was expecting. Each artist gave such a moving presentation of the immigrant stories. As an instructor, I was particularly struck by the notion that education feels pointless to a people who do not have legal status. That reality had never crossed my mind before and my heart broke as I thought of all of the dreams that would be forsaken as a result of our punitive system.

(Mexican-American Audience Member)

For Mexican-American audience members interviewed the performance was not one of dissonance but of cross over and emotional and cognitive connection between the worlds of the subjects and their own life experiences:

I was listening and watching and thinking this could be my story, this could be my story, a Mexican story. In each story I saw everyone's story. I could see myself and a friend of mine in the audience and other friends who were not there....and I thought we are all experiencing this and can do something positive together.

(Mexican-American Audience Member)

It made me cry. I felt the words. I knew the words. We all know someone who is experiencing the same and it made you think and want to stand up and shout and say ‘look at us, we are here and this is what you are doing and it’s time to stop, it time to offer a better future

(Mexican-American Audience Member)

The dance performance really hit home. I have many family members who are undocumented and when she moved and said Clandestina I really felt it. I know what it is like to have all these feelings and experiences, to be afraid, to be exploited, to have hopes and dreams fall down...to be on my knees. Watching this I had tears in my eyes. But I was also inspired by the performance, inspired to carry on

(Mexican-American Audience member)

The interweaving and (re)presentation of the life history data into a performance engendered a sensuous, emotional and evocative range of meanings for audience members. Eisner (2001) speaks of the way in which the arts ‘communicate the way something feels, that is, its emotional character...it shows it and showing it makes empathy possible’ (p.136). The performance brought the data to sensuous life, imbuing the data with a moving emotional dimension. Dolan (2001) observes the ways in which a performance may enable audience members to emotionally “see as if for the first time or see anew” and as such has the potential to provoke within them a

desire for social change. Further and significantly, the impact of the performance on the audience did not end with the performance but continued to linger reflectively on a personal and political level long after the final curtain, as evidenced from the continual stream of emails received even weeks later. As the extract from following email reveals:

It has been almost a month since I saw *Undocumented Historias in the Desert of Dreams* and I am still thinking about it. Here is the most amazing result of your event. The sharing of stories continued even after the show. My mother shared a story she heard many years ago, about her father immigrating to the United States in the early 1920s. He came on a train through the Southwest and was told, along with the rest of the Mexicans, to exit the train and walk around the small town of Tucson since the sheriff of the town didn't link Mexicans and always checked trains to ensure none were aboard. And then a friend Susan who was with me spoke of her grandfather. She shared his struggle in Louisiana, of speaking French, and the discrimination her family endured... I have never thought about the collective history we have, with ancestors sharing similar trials as foreigners trying to make a home in this land....The profound experience I had was surely shared by many. You should be proud of the impact of this event on our community.

(Mexican-American Audience Member)

For Madison (2005) one of the key tests of a 'performance of possibilities' is when audience members leave the theater continuing to think and reflect on what they had seen. All the members of the audience who we interviewed or from whom we received emails were seemingly

positioned as citizens touched or connected with the lived experiences of the interviewee's stories; able to see and feel their injustices and provoked to co-join with them in challenging the status quo and working for social change.

A performance of provocation

Many political and educational plans have failed because their authors designed them according to their own personal views of reality, never once taking into account (except as mere objects of their action) the woman/man-in-a-situation towards whom their programme was ostensibly directed'

(Freire, 1996, p.66)

Given the relative lack of published work on the impact of arts-based performance, especially one which is non-auto-ethnographic in character, the article sought to reflect on participants – artists, subjects and audience –experience of a live performance. A performance which in keeping with the aim of critical arts-based research would provoke participants; creating both an emotional and critically informed space in which dominant racialized knowledge systems are challenged and the 'hyphenated' voices of undocumented Mexican-Americans are legitimized, promoted and supported to enrich a critique of the social order. Our critical arts-based work in terms of its CRT frame, life history co-production of counter-narratives and staged live performance may be conceptually positioned as informing a pedagogical process of conscientization (Freire, 2000, p.39), in which subjects, artists and audience achieved an

increased collective level of critical awareness of undocumented Mexican-American oppression and desire to act against the injustices they encounter.

Madison (2005) correctly cautions that artists should not assume that they alone have the knowledge and skill to motivate people to “intervene in injustice,” for people have long been intervening and will continue to do so through various forms. Following Madison we do not ‘mean to imply that one performance can rain down a revolution, but one performance can be revolutionary in enlightening citizens to the possibilities that grate against injustice’ (Madison, 2005, p.174). Arguably, for participants the performance functioned as a critical pedagogical device to propagate a discernment of multiple meanings and interpretations of lived experience, one able to evoke and provoke and with the capacity to transpose artists, subjects, and audience ‘into new, critical political spaces’ (Denzin 2003, p.19) of cultural awareness and support. Significantly, immediately following the performance Fundación México organised a reception and provided free food and drinks and an auction was held where the artists’ paintings and photographs were sold along with personally signed books by the prominent Mexican academic and author of Chicano Literature, Miguel Méndez. The event subsequently raised enough funds to support two scholarships for undocumented Mexican-American students of Mexican to defray college expenses for two semesters. In this important regard the research project was able, in a small way, to have a material impact on real lives.

We contend that the research text presented as performance possessed an evocative and provocative life and power able to recover and interrogate the lived experience of undocumented Mexican-Americans in a way which other forms of representation are unable to achieve (Denzin, 1999, Pifer, 1999). The use of performance facilitating an important disruption of the mono-

vocal and mono-logical nature and omniscience of the analytic voice found within print-based texts. Pifer (1999) considers, ‘that through performance the lives, voices, and events presented will have a life and power not possible through other forms of representation’ (p. 542). The kinaesthetic energy of the performance providing the data with a lifelike dimension, elevating experiences and voices contained within the research, which otherwise may have remained textually subjugated; the performed texts enabling those delivering and witnessing a live performance to share in the co-construction of meaning. In effect, the participants’ immersion and acts of co-creation enabling a *performance of provocation* that diffuses and blurs the labels of artists, subjects and audience and opens up new evocative spaces for feeling and knowing. As Denzin (2003) states:

[i]n the moment of performance, these texts have the potential to overcome the biases of a positivist, ocular, visual epistemology. They undo the gazing eye of the modernist ethnographer, bringing audiences and performers into a jointly felt and shared field of experience.

(Denzin, 2003, p 37)

Foucault (1965) contends dominant groups within society and the discourses they incorporate and use constitute society’s “major narratives, told, retold and varied; formulae, texts, ritualized texts to be spoken in well-defined circumstances; things said once, and conserved because people suspect some hidden secret or wealth lies buried within” (Foucault, 1965, p.152). These major or ‘master’ narratives are all encompassing in character and hold to a distinct ideological point of view which is presented as authoritative, exclusionary and final (Barone 2008) and which can be evidenced in the prevailing dominant US discourse around ‘illegal’ Mexican aliens. We would

contend that the live performance-based expression of an alternative discourse based on the counter-narratives of subjects – in this case undocumented Mexican-Americans society – created an opportunity to question and disrupt the master narrative (Corey 1998, Deal, 2008). The performance provoking, questioning, moving forward and challenging taken for granted assumptions about social relations of power and opening up political spaces for debate and intellectually deepened critical reflection.

Undocumented Historias in the Desert of Dreams was a performance capable of moving artists, subjects and audience into new cultural spaces of understanding, resistance and hope; speaking not only to a ‘politics of resistance’ (Denzin, 2003, p.16) but a ‘politics of possibility’ (Denzin, 2003, p.18). As Bowman (2002, p.193) notes “such performances will never “prove” anything to our more empiricist colleagues. But most performances never try to prove anything, anyway. They only provoke things. Sometimes, they even provoke thought”. Hopefully, thought which could inspire critically conscious social action.

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